

Celebrate America's birthday throughout the Hoosier State.

By Sally Campbell Grout

They didn't know it at the time, but our Founding Fathers did us quite a favor by declaring their independence on the Fourth of July. Had they declared it in, say, the middle of January, we wouldn't be able to celebrate with parades, fireworks, cookouts, and exciting events such as these:

So much for a lazy river.

Back in the 1800s, when spectators watched steamboats race along the Ohio River, they scarcely could have imagined the kind of "don't blink or you'll miss it" excitement that defines the Madison Regatta (812-265-5000). This event, which takes place July 2-4, celebrates its 54th anniversary this year. Along with unlimited hydroplane racing at speeds topping 200 miles per hour, the Madison Regatta celebrates the weekend with vintage boat exhibitions, fireworks, air shows, music, and food. If you can't make it to the event, the town of Madison (800-559-2956) is a great spot to visit any time. Historic 19th century architecture can be found along no less than 133 blocks to create Indiana's largest historic district. In fact, it's listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

One prairie, several celebrations.

Maybe they've never heard the "fwoomp" of a gas grill firing up, but those 19th century residents of Conner Prairie in Fishers (800-966-1836) still know what an Independence Day celebration is all about. During "Glorious Fourth," July 2-5, you can join in the fun while you turn back the clock. Special events include old-fashioned competitions such as watermelon seed spitting and a tomahawk throw, a Temperance Tea at Liberty Corner, holiday crafts, barn dancing, militia muster, ice cream making, and a 19th-century-style baseball game. If your holiday isn't complete without a few fireworks and a Sousa tune or two, grab a blanket, pack a picnic, and come to Conner Prairie in the evening for Symphony on the Prairie. "An American Salute" concerts begin at 7:30 p.m. from July 1-4; gates open at 4 p.m. during this popular annual event. (For regular Symphony on the Prairie performances, gates open a little later.)

A cool zoo and a race, too.

In their June/July 2004 issue, "Child" magazine named the Fort Wayne Children's Zoo (260-427-6800) ninth on its list of the nation's top 10 zoos for kids. They only confirmed what people in the area have known for years: that this is one great place for family fun. Located on 40 acres, the zoo features an African Veldt with giraffes, zebras, warthogs and other African animals; an Indonesian Rain Forest, featuring tigers, a Komodo dragon, orangutans, and Rain Forest butterflies; an Australian Adventure, home of Tasmanian devils, kangaroos, lorikeets, dingoes. Australia After

Dark introduces you to “night creatures,” such as the fruit bat, while tropical fish of the Great Barrier Reef swim through a 20,000-gallon aquarium. In the Central Zoo area, resident animals include penguins, sea lions, red pandas and giant tortoises. The Central Zoo is also where you’ll find the Indiana Family Farm area (where kids can hug and pet some friendly critters); pony rides, and an 1860 miniature train welcoming you to climb aboard. This July 4, you can visit the zoo and help it out by participating in “Run Wild.” This annual four-mile road and trail foot race, with both walk and run categories, benefits the zoo.

First, invest in a pair of flip-flops.

For those who feel the summer isn’t complete unless you’ve scorched the soles of your feet on a sizzling beach, rest assured that the sand at the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore (800-959-9174) and Indiana Dunes State Park (219-926-1952) is sufficiently toasty by July Fourth. The official address for both is Chesterton, but the beach stretches for nearly 25 miles along the southern shore of Lake Michigan touching Lake, Porter and LaPorte Counties. The Dunes and the lake combine to for an ideal spot for all those summer sports—from fishing to wave running to sand castle building—but this area is also home to unique wildlife and plants, wetlands, a bog, and woodlands forests. The National Lakeshore’s Bailly homestead and Chellburg Farm offer a glimpse of early life in this picturesque area.

Crowd? What crowd?

Conventional wisdom says to visit Parke County (765-569-5226) and its covered bridges in the fall, when the autumn colors provide a perfect backdrop and the Parke County Covered Bridge Festival is in full swing. However, green leaves provide a lovely background, too. This July 4, consider a driving tour through the area with stops at each of the county’s 32 historic bridges. Parke County offers plenty of opportunities for outdoor recreation, too. The 2,065-acre Raccoon Lake and 100-acre Rockville Lake (765-344-1884 for both properties) provide ample space for swimming, boating, camping, hiking, and fishing. At Turkey Run State Park & Inn (877-500-6151), you can swim in a heated pool and sleep in air-conditioned comfort. An award-winning restaurant, nature programs, conference center, suspension bridge, and saddle barn make this a great destination any time.

The perfect end to a perfect weekend.

Few cities can do it, but Evansville (800-433-3025) seems to have struck the just-right balance of big city excitement and small town accessibility, which combine for a great July 4 getaway that’s not at a frantic pace. Saturday, you can spend an hour or two at Willard Library (812-425-4309), Indiana’s oldest public library, researching your family tree or looking for the ghost who’s rumored to live there. Visit Angel Mounds

State Historic Site (812-853-3956) to see a prehistoric village; tour the historic Reitz Home Museum (812-426-1871), a gracious and spacious Victorian house museum; then, catapult yourself back to the 21st century with the excitement of Casino Aztar (812-433-4390). Spend Sunday with more than 500 animals at Evansville's Mesker Park Zoo & Botanic Garden (812-435-6143). Then, Sunday night, July 4, park yourself downtown on the banks of the Ohio River for an incredible fireworks display. The show starts about 9:30, so give yourself plenty of time to get a good spot!

A few Fourth of July festivals.

What better way to salute our country than to celebrate in the small towns that give it its charm? Dozens of friendly festivals take place across Indiana over the holiday weekend. Here are just a few:

Folks who like a good polka and a tasty European treat flock to Whiting July 23-25 for the Pierogi Fest (877-659-0292), but the town throws a pretty good party earlier in the month, too. The Whiting 4th of July Festival (219-659-7700), which runs from June 30-July 4, features carnival rides, food, a beer garden and live bands nightly.

You can't help but feel patriotic when you hear a stirring rendition of an all-American tune. The Roanoke Patriot Pops Festival (260-672-8800), which takes place July 3, is an outdoor event with the Fort Wayne Philharmonic. The festival honors American heritage and local military heroes. Food and children's games add to the celebration.

In Fowler, the Fowler Fourth of July Celebration (765-884-8277) July 3-4 features one of the state's best fireworks displays, along with music, a parade, and flea markets.

Start celebrating early at CarmelFest in Carmel (317-844-8076) July 2-3. Enjoy food, crafts, display booths, professional stage entertainment, family games, a parade, a spectacular fireworks show, and a symphony concert.

Anyone can have a pie-eating contest. But only at the Shoals Catfish Festival (812-247-2828) July 2-4 will you find—you guessed it—catfish eating contests. Also on the menu for fun: catfish fishing contests, a flea market, queen contest, and softball, basketball and volleyball tournaments.

While you're celebrating the early days of our nation, why not celebrate the early days of the state? Corydon, the state's first capital, invites you to Old Capitol Days (812-738-4890) July 3-4. This patriotic celebration includes pioneer demonstrations, living history camps, an arts and crafts fair, special exhibits, and a parade.

Let the celebrating begin:

To find more ways to say “Happy Birthday America” Indiana style, and to request a copy of your Indiana Festival Guide filled with celebrations and fun events all year long, visit enjoyindiana.com.